

## [Yellow Roses](#) by [Luddleston](#)

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**Summary:**

Ed meets a lost boy wandering around a nasty part of town and offers to hide him from the bullies who chased him all the way down here from that poncy boarding school.

He learns that the boy's name is Stede, and he likes picking flowers, and he's never really had a friend before. And neither has Ed, come to think of it.

(AU where Ed and Stede meet in their mid-teens instead of on the high seas.)

## **Yellow Roses**

### **Author's Note:**

I just think they are Babey.

This is most likely going to be a series of semi-connected vignettes, that I work on when I need a break from Serious Writing!

It took Ed about thirty seconds to tell that this kid was lost.

First off, there was the look of him. Short, blond, pale, and though his clothes were dirty, they were high quality, not the tattered rags outfitting every scrawny dockworker's bastard that walked these streets. His coat was a little too big, like somebody'd thought he'd grow into it, and he huddled down into it, arms wrapped around himself, as he walked down the street, moving quickly, his eyes darting around.

Definitely lost.

Ed followed him, not really sure why he was doing it. He had the time, he supposed. A few shipments had missed their arrival time, so Ed was out of work until they docked, and somebody needed a strong boy with steady hands to help unload the cargo ships and reload them again.

He wasn't sure what he would do when he actually caught up to him. Maybe he would try to steal the fancy coat. Maybe he would ask the kid to pay him so he could escort him back to wherever he came from. Maybe he'd just ask why the poor guy looked so sad and pitiful.

Christ, this little shit really was upper crust. Ed had been following him for two blocks now and he hadn't noticed. If Ed didn't shadow him and keep an eye out, somebody much worse was going to snatch him up. Sure, it was broad daylight, but that didn't mean you just went wandering around seedy neighborhoods in your little white breeches with your matching socks.

Ed had to kick a rock into a wall to get the kid to turn around.

When he saw Ed, standing there with his shirtsleeves rolled up and his hands shoved into his pockets, he gasped, stumbled a half-step back, tripped over a mislaid paver, and went straight onto his ass. What a walking disaster.

Ed stepped closer and the boy flinched, lifting a hand to his face, which, Ed noticed, was already darkened with a fresh bruise. Damn it if Ed's heart didn't just bleed a little watching it. It was like trying to approach a dog who was used to getting rocks thrown at it, pleading eyes and little whimpers and all.

"It's okay, I didn't mean to scare you." Ed held out a hand.

The boy took it. When he rose, and Ed got a better look at him, he realized that the oversized coat and the round face and the poncy outfit was probably making the kid look younger than he was, and he was a little closer to Ed's seventeen years. On second glance, he was dressed like the boys from the boarding school came down this way, leering into bordellos because they were a bunch of little creeps. He didn't look like a leering little creep, though.

"Do you... do you know somewhere I can hide, maybe?" he asked, his soft voice quavering a little.

"Uh." Ed knew several hiding places. Dozens. Hundreds, maybe. There were all the little holes he'd hidden in when he was hoping his father would tire of looking for him, and then there was the spot in the back of the alley, up over that wall, where he'd gone when he swore someone was going to call the police when they found the body—

"It's just that—the Badminton brothers are trying to find me."

Ed didn't know what the fuck a Badminton brother was, but it was enough to snap him out of his memories. "Right. Yeah, come with me," he said. "Are you a good climber?"

"Um, not really, but I'll try," he peeped.

There was a rooftop you could access down the road if you shimmied up a gutter, but Ed didn't trust this kid with that. He led him to the spot, taking a look over his shoulder for these 'Badmintons', and when he saw nobody but the usual crowd, he turned back to the kid. "Right. Step here."

"What?"

"Put your foot in my hands and I'll boost you up, go on." He cupped both his palms together, lowering himself into a squat. "Go *on*," he repeated, and the kid made a little 'eep!' noise and did as told.

He boosted him up, which got the front of his breeches as grubby as the back, and then Ed went after, hauling himself up with practiced ease and landing next to the kid, who was breathing heavy in a panicked sort of way.

Ed followed his eye line and saw two other boys in fancy-school clothes (now, those ones *did* look like shitty little creeps) racing down the center of the road like they owned the place. One of them was holding an oar, and the other one was shouting, "*come out, come out, Baby Bonnet!*"

The kid, probably the aforementioned 'Baby Bonnet' had his knees pulled up to his chest and made a little snuffle, burying his face there. Was he crying? God. Ed didn't think he'd cried since before he learned to count, save for one night. He was almost jealous, that somebody else could cry so easily. Just let it all out.

"Uh, so. I'm Ed," said Ed.

The boy tilted his face, looking at Ed out of an eye ringed by a gradually-swelling bruise. "Stede," he said.

"Why're those pricks chasing you, anyway?"

"I don't know." Stede sighed. "Probably to tie me to a rowboat and laugh while I try to get away. Or make me French kiss a horse. Or just hit me if they're feeling particularly uncreative."

"Shit. What a bunch of little bastards," Ed said. "What'd you ever do to deserve that?" It still felt like something unnecessarily cruel even if Stede had offended them.

He mumbled something Ed couldn't hear.

"What's that?" Ed asked.

"I said '*I like to pick flowers.*' And also read books. And practice my calligraphy."

He liked to *pick flowers*. And they wanted to hit him for it? Ed's heart broke. He didn't know any boys who liked to pick flowers—no girls, either. "That's complete bullshit," he said.

Stede flinched. "I know, I know. Father says it's not very masculine either."

"What? Not you. Them. They're bullshit. Why would you hit somebody for picking flowers?" Or for cooking something you didn't like. Or for letting the lamps run out of oil because you couldn't afford more. Or for not having the house clean when you got back from the pub. Ed felt a pinprick of the same blind rage that had released the monster inside him, and he had to look very hard at the grubby roof tiles beneath his feet until it subsided.

"I don't know," Stede said. "I never really stop and ask them. They don't seem like the sort for philosophical questions."

"Want me to beat them up?" Ed suggested.

Stede blanched. "I don't think more violence will solve this."

"Well, we won't know that til we try it," Ed said, which had been a joke, but Stede looked a bit upset and therefore had perhaps taken it literally. "I'm kidding," Ed had to inform him. "I won't do that."

Stede let out a breath of relief that told Ed he had definitely taken it literally.

"Hey, uh. You said you liked to pick flowers?"

Stede nodded, looking at his lap. His ears went all pink, like he was embarrassed to agree with this even though Ed was repeating what he'd already said. "Can you show me where to find some?" Ed asked.

Stede gave him a bewildered look. "I... well, yes. Close to campus."

"Okay, yeah. Show me. And if those assholes show up again, I probably won't even have to fight them, they'll get scared off just looking at me." He stood up, put his hands on his hips, and tried to show Stede he was properly intimidating without scaring *him* off.

"You think so?" Stede asked, blinking those big brown eyes up at him.

"Yeah, I know it," Ed said. "Now that I've seen them? I'm bigger than them, stronger than them. I'll tell 'em I'm a pirate. They'll be pissing themselves."

"Alright, then," Stede agreed. "Um. How do we get down?"

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Ed helped Stede off the roof with a minimum of falling, and then discovered that Stede truly *was* lost. Didn't even know his way back to school from there, poor guy.

"You're lucky I know my way around," Ed told him, leading him away from the docks and back into the hoity-toity part of town, where people looked at Ed like he was probably going to snatch their wallets. With Stede at his side, he got less of those looks, although the townsfolk still seemed a little disturbed, probably because both of them were so grubby.

Well, they ought to try climbing up and down a rooftop and keeping their trousers clean. Assholes.

They slowed a little as they walked through all the shops. Stede liked looking through the window of the dress shops—both ladies' dress and mens'—and Ed peered through the front door of a bookshop just to marvel at how many volumes they had in there. It even *smelled* better in this part of town, like something soft and sweet and warm...

Or maybe that was just the bakery up ahead.

Ed's stomach growled so loud it made Stede jump. Not his fault, he'd missed out on the meal he'd get as part of a day's work, and then, instead of lying low and conserving his energy, he'd gone climbing around and running across town with Stede.

In response, Stede headed straight toward the bakery. "I'm hungry, too," he said. "I don't have enough on me for anything fancy, but I get get us some bread."

*Us.* Like he didn't for a second consider only feeding himself. Ed was normally irritated by the idea of accepting handouts, but Stede didn't give him a moment's chance to become annoyed before darting through the bakery door, holding it open for Ed to follow him.

The inside of the bakery smelled even better than the outside, rich and sweet, so heavy in Ed's nose he could practically taste it on his tongue. Everything looked as good as it smelled, too: bread braided into extravagant knots, little tarts with crimped edges and piles of fruit in the center, soft meringues so white they had to be made with the purest sugar.

Stede asked the baker for two bread rolls and handed over a couple of coins without even bargaining. He passed one to Ed, gave the baker a short bow with his thanks (people actually *did* that?) and held open the door for Ed again on the way out.

They walked while they ate, and the day started to become a little warmer, although no less cloudy than it'd dawned. The bread was *impossibly* good, soft and fluffy with the crust baked to a perfect gold. When Ed's mother made bread, it was with rough-milled flour, dense and crumbly, the sort of thing you used to mop up stew. He'd never thought it was bad, it filled up his stomach and it was especially nice when he managed to get home while it was still warm.

But although his mother's cooking was nice, this was perhaps the *king* of breads. "How do they get it so sweet?" Ed wondered. "Is there honey in this?"

Stede chewed and swallowed before answering. "Yes," he said, "do you dislike it? Sorry, I ought to have asked."

"No, it's amazing. You didn't have to buy me this, you know." The statement was contrary to the fact that Ed shoved the rest of the roll into his mouth.

"You didn't have to escort me back," Stede countered. "I expect that's how friends are. You do things for one another that you don't have to."

"You expect?"

"I've never had a friend before," Stede said, leading them off a main road and down a dirt path, now that he knew where they were headed. "And don't tease, I'm aware of how pathetic that sounds."

"S not," Ed said. "I've never had a friend before, either."

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Stede led him to a garden with a winding path, lined by flowering trees with limbs so long and low, it was as if they made a tunnel over the walk. There were flowers planted on either side and clearly carefully tended to. Ed couldn't even name them all, but he recognized rose bushes, the white, pink, and yellow flowers standing out against the dark green leaves.

"I didn't even know they came in that many colors," he said, approaching the roses, looking for the traditional red, and finding orange ones instead.

"They bushes are specially groomed to produce a range of colors," Stede informed him. "That way, you can put different ones in your bouquet according to their meaning."

"I thought giving somebody a flower just meant, 'here's a flower'," Ed said, crouching to get a better look. He reached out and tested one of the thorns against his fingertip. It didn't pierce through his callus.



"And there, you would be wrong!" Stede brightened, brushing his fingers over one of the pink blossoms. "I have a book about what all the flowers mean."

"So, what about these?" Ed asked of the orange rose. "What does it say if you give somebody this?"

"It would mean you're fascinated with them," Stede said, and Ed very nearly considered plucking one off and giving it to Stede. 'Fascinated' was appropriate. "And here, these pink ones are also a gesture of appreciation of somebody, but they're more innocent, friendly. The white ones represent purity, you'd see those in a bride's bouquet—"

"Not any bride where I'm from," Ed snorted.

"Well, maybe not every bride," Stede said, clearing his throat as he backtracked a little. "Anyway, yellow is for friendship. It's a nice color, I think."

"It is a nice color," Ed agreed. Yellow like sunshine, like Stede's blond hair. "Those ones, then."

Stede looked at him briefly, perplexed.

"I'm going to pick some."

"Oh!" Stede rocked forward on his toes, looking a bit excited. "To give to somebody, with your sentiments?"

"Yeah, I think she'll like them." Ed pulled his knife from his pocket and made quick work of the stems, so he didn't have to grasp them by the thorny bits to pluck them.

"Oh—if it's a girl, maybe... well, there aren't any red ones, but some of the other varieties around here express affection more plainly."

"What?" Ed stood, now holding three blossoms carefully. "No, my mum likes roses. Always said if I was a girl she would've named me 'Rose'."

"They're... for your mother?"

"Don't laugh at me about it."

"I'm not," Stede said, shaking his head. "It's just... that's sweet of you, Ed."

Ed drew his shoulders up to his ears, embarrassment prickling at him. "Well, she deserves it." He waited a moment longer, and then took a step backward. "Thanks for showing me. I take it you know your way back from here."

"Wait!" Stede called. "I'd like to... if you don't mind, maybe see you here again sometime?"

"Sure," Ed agreed immediately. "Sunday? No work on Sundays."

"Yes, after church," Stede smiled at him, like sunshine, like yellow. Ed didn't go to church, so he wasn't sure what time that would be, but he'd stay here all morning and afternoon just in case.

"Alright, then," Ed said.

"Alright."

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Mum said she loved the flowers.

Well, first she asked Ed if he stole them, but when Ed said no, he got them from a friend, she smiled, scruffed her fingers through his hair, and told him to give his friend her thanks.

### **Author's Note:**

For more gay pirate nonsense, as well as my Serious Writing which is mostly nonsense about the Iliad, find me on twitter [@luddlestons](#) or on my tumblr [@luddlestons](#)